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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest examines the Spanish-speaking group in the United States, its growth through net immigration and natural increase, and its eventual decline as speakers shift to English. The Hispanic population is growing rapidly, but data suggest that U.S. Hispanics do learn and speak English. Research predicts that by the year 2001 the Spanish-speaking group will total 16.6 million and some 95% of the immigrant population will have Spanish for their mother tongues. However, only a bare majority of the U.S. native born will be given Spanish as their first language. Although most Hispanic immigrants remain lifetime bilinguals, the language shift begins immediately upon an immigrant's arrival in the United States, and ends within approximately 15 years. The language shift spans three generations, beginning with the immigrants who continue to speak Spanish, and ending with their grandchildren who virtually all have English as their mother tongue. Policy implications are: (1) the English language is not endangered by the use of Spanish; (2) simple courtesy suggests that essential public announcements and services should be provided in Spanish; (3) more English classes for adults are needed; (4) Spanish-speaking children need bilingual education; and (5) bilingual capabilities should be encouraged among all. (KS)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools

May 1991

Use of the Spanish Language in the United States: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

EDO-RC-91-2

CONTINUING CONTROVERSY about the nation's non-English speakers—particularly its Spanish speakers—often prompts two questions. First, will the use of Spanish diminish or grow more widespread? Second, is the use of the Spanish language only a challenge for educators and citizens, or does it also present opportunities as yet unrealized?

This Digest addresses policymakers, administrators, and teachers of Spanish-speaking students. It is based largely on a study by sociologist Calvin Veltman (1988), *The Future of the Spanish Language in the United States*. The Digest examines the Spanish-speaking group in the United States, its growth through net immigration and natural increase, and its eventual decline as speakers shift to English.

The numbers

Not all U.S. Hispanics speak Spanish, of course, but almost all U.S. Spanish speakers are Hispanic, and the Hispanic population is growing rapidly. In 1989, the nation's Hispanic population was estimated to be 20.1 million, a *39 percent increase* over the 1980 Census figure of 14.5 million. The rate of increase for the total U.S. population was 9.5 percent, but for the non-Hispanic population it was 7.5 percent. Hispanics were 8.2 percent of the population in 1989, compared to 6.5 percent in 1980 (Hispanic Policy Development Project, 1990).

The Hispanic Policy Development Project (HPDP, 1990) has projected the following U.S. Hispanic population figures:

1990: 22,024,000

1995: 27,692,000, and

2000: 34,818,000.

Due to immigration and natural increase, the number of U.S. Spanish speakers will continue to grow (for example, Word, 1989), but the recent study by Veltman (1988) sharply contradicts the widespread impression that Hispanic immigrants to the United States resist learning English.

Despite public opinion to the contrary, the data suggest that U.S. Hispanics—both native born and immigrants—do learn and speak English. Moreover, they want their children to speak English (Veltman, 1988). After 10 to 15 years in the United States, some 75 percent of all Hispanic immigrants are speaking English regularly, and virtually all their children will speak English.

The maintenance of Spanish language use in the United States depends on the continuous arrival of new Hispanic immigrants. Because of ongoing immigration, bilingualism may indeed persist longer among Hispanics than it did among other immigrant groups, particularly in certain parts of the country. But continuing immigration does *not* delay the learning of English by immigrants who are already here or by the native born (Veltman, 1988).

Veltman developed unique population models simulating the flow of immigrants and their children into national language communities. His model is similar to that used by the U.S. Census Bureau (for example, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982), but adds language practice and language change factors (Veltman, 1988, chapter 10). Although he analyzes much of the language data collected by the Census Bureau, his projections are based largely on data derived from the Bureau's 1976 Survey of Income and Education. This survey contains the best available data for both mother tongue and current language use.

In 1976, some 10.5 million people in the United States spoke Spanish. Of these, only about 4.5 million were mainly Spanish-speaking, including 2 million who spoke Spanish only occasionally. However, some of those who have shifted to English were not counted; lost to the surveys are Hispanics who speak English and live in households where English is the principal home language. They likely have been classified as "Anglophones," persons of English mother tongue in Veltman's terminology. ("Mother tongue" is the language first learned and spoken as a child.)

Using a model that projects a net Hispanic immigration of 250,000 per year, Veltman predicts that the Spanish-speaking group, both monolingual and bilingual, will total 16.6 million by the year 2001 (Veltman, 1988, p. 102). Of these, some 95 percent of the *immigrant* population will have Spanish for their mother tongue. However, only a bare majority of the *native born* will be given Spanish as their first language. This fact is of pivotal importance.

Do they learn and use English?

How rapidly individuals learn English and how much English they speak is related to how long they have been in the United States and how old they were when they arrived. Almost all Hispanic immigrants remain lifetime bilinguals; they use different languages in different situations. But the language shift process begins immediately upon an immigrant's arrival in the U.S., progresses rapidly, and ends within approximately 15 years. The younger the person, the more complete is the movement to English (Garcia, 1983; Veltman, 1988).

With respect to immigrant children, 70 percent of those 5 to 9 years of age, after a stay of about 9 months, speak English on a regular basis. After 4 years, nearly all speak English regularly, and about 30 percent prefer English to Spanish. After 9 years, 60 percent have shifted to English; after 14 years—as young adults—70 percent have abandoned the use of Spanish as a daily language. By the time they have spent 15 years in the United States, some 75 percent of all Hispanic immigrants are using English every day (Veltman, 1988, p. 44).

The future of the Spanish language in the U.S. depends on the

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language choices of persons of Spanish mother tongue; what language will they give to their children? The use of English by parents leads inexorably to the birth of children whose mother tongue becomes English (Garcia, 1983; Veltman, 1988).

The language-shift process

Like the language shift of immigrants before them, that of Spanish-speaking immigrants spans three generations.

- The generation of immigrants continues to speak Spanish, although most also speak English regularly. More than half the immigrants arriving in the United States before age 14 make English their usual everyday language, and Spanish becomes a second language. A small number, in fact, no longer speak it at all.
- Their children speak English fluently, although they may use Spanish as a second language. A significant number, however, are given English as their mother tongue, and 7 out of 10 become English speakers for all practical purposes.
- Virtually all their grandchildren will have English for their mother tongue, and they will speak Spanish seldom, if at all.

Thus, the maintenance of Spanish language use in the U.S. requires a continuous flow of new Hispanic immigrants. According to Veltman's model, a break in the immigrant stream would stabilize the size of the Spanish-speaking population for about 15 years. After such a break, decline would become increasingly more rapid.

Conclusions

Given the inevitable shift of Spanish speakers to the use of English, what are the policy implications? They entail several conclusions and recommendations (Estrada, 1988; Veltman, 1988), as follows.

- The English language is not endangered by the use of Spanish.
- Simple courtesy suggests that essential public announcements and services should be provided in Spanish, especially for the very young and the elderly.
- Many more English classes for adults are needed. Current waiting lists are long in many communities—notably in New York City and Los Angeles—with large and growing concentrations of Hispanics.
- Spanish-speaking children need bilingual education.
- Bilingual capabilities should be encouraged generally—among everyone, regardless of mother tongue.

Bilingual education programs do not slow the process of language shift to English (HPDP, 1988; Veltman, 1988). The purpose of such programs, after all, is to smooth the transition to English, not to maintain Spanish.

But bilingual classes do enable Hispanic children to maintain their grade levels and to avoid being held back, while at the same time learning English (Veltman, 1983). The children will—in any case—learn English, but, according to the Hispanic Policy Development Project,

> These children are best served by programs that teach English and simultaneously develop basic reading and computation skills in Spanish.... At present, less than a quarter of Hispanic children who need language assistance are enrolled in transitional bilingual or other programs designed to expedite language shift and provide basic skills education.
>
> (HPDP, 1988, pp. 9, 26)

Nicolau and Valdivieso (1988) report that 25 percent of Hispanic students fall behind their classmates and are overage as they begin high school. According to this account, poor academic performance and being older in grade than their peers contribute significantly to the high Hispanic dropout rates of 45 to 50 percent.

Nicolau and Valdivieso also suggested that the bilingual capabilities of the nation's Spanish speakers, currently scorned, should be put to use. By some estimates, there will be 550 million Spanish-speaking consumers in Latin America by the year 2000. With some foresight, the U.S. economy and national influence could be enhanced by the preservation of a pool of literate Spanish speakers. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show, however, that only 4 percent of Hispanic students sign up for the three years of high school Spanish that would develop the necessary literacy.

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